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Pentagon Papers: An Ugly Picture Of Men, Motives

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Publication of the Pentagon Papers by the New York Times — the "nuclear bomb rocking Washington" — destroys the credibility of more public figures in one stroke than probably any "inside report" in history.

These men stand naked — from President Kennedy and President Johnson to highly regarded academics and career statesmen like the Bundy brothers to cabinet secretaries Rusk and McNamara to military men like generals Westmoreland and Taylor (also an ambassador) and the admirals.

The Kennedy administration, though ultimately spared from major escalation decisions by the death of President Kennedy, transformed the policy of "limited-risk gamble" which it inherited into a "broad commitment" that left LBJ with a choice between more war and withdrawal.

Further, most of the principals in the key decisions of the Johnson administration were men he kept on after Kennedy's death.

WHAT ARE now labeled "the Pentagon Papers" will in some circles be called "McNamara's Folly" — for it was he who ordered the study, apparently deep in the personal depression growing out of his involvement in the whole Vietnam affair.

Surely no President will ever again allow the preparation of such a report by a department of government with access to secret documents. Probably never in modern

times have the facts come to light so quickly after the events — making the excruciating judgment of history even more painful because it comes within the lifetimes and the careers of the men involved.

THE DISCLOSURES of the McNamara-ordered study show that:

U.S. OFFICIALS were much more interested in the American image than about the plight of the South Vietnamese.

POLICY was based to an alarming degree on the so-called domino theory — that if South Vietnam and Laos fell to Communism, so would all Asia — despite a CIA analysis that indicated the theory was nonsense and that only Cambodia if any other country would be affected.

PRESIDENTS get a good range of advice on such critical issues as Vietnam and that leaves them relatively free to choose to do whatever their instincts would have them do.

ONCE THE PRESIDENT has decided on a course of action, all levels of government — career people included — seem ready to bend every effort to support and justify the decision.

PRESIDENTS and their advisers are willing to lie endlessly to the American public, to Congress, to the world — if lying seems in their own short-range self-interest.

"THE PENTAGON Papers" cement many impressions:

IT WAS "Alice in Wonderland" in Saigon — as the Pentagon analyst described it — in the period when LBJ decided that he had to give all-out support to the feeble South Vietnam government, no matter what the consequences of such action were to be.

LIFE WITH LBJ in the White House during those days were like living with a collection of speed freaks. Action begat action begat action — each heating up the war and each moving to a new level of danger. And — always — the attempt to move without letting the public or Congress know what was going on.

Adding to the hectic nature of the play was the constant changing of the principals by Johnson as he named new generals, new ambassadors, new advisers.

THE SANEST man in the whole ugly drama appears to have been Undersecretary of State George Ball who said:

In the beginning: "Don't do it."

Later: "If you do, you'll be sorry."

Still later: "Stop. Never mind your losses — get out!"

THE "NEXT SANEST" was CIA Director John McCone, who predicted that bombing the North would make them more determined, not force them to negotiate; then predicted that a U.S. ground war would only repeat Korea's mistake.

The CIA generally comes off with good marks — its assessments of both military and political situations seems to have been excellent.

It's noteworthy because so many peace advocates have blamed the CIA for many of the problems the U.S. has faced in recent years.

THE 47-VOLUMES of the Pentagon Papers show a picture of the principals:

ROBERT McNAMARA — interested only in how to do it better — no matter what "it" was: bombing, maneuvering, reporting, use of materials

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and men. No strong opinions about what "should" be done, judging by the documents in the study.

DEAN RUSK — a man still living in the "contain China" days, the last remnant of the philosophy of former Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.

THE BUNDY BROTHERS — they suggested almost every possible course of action — at one time or another. William Bundy, the one at the State Department, had talent for finding "middle ground" between the extremes of "do nothing" and "all-out war".

As events unfolded, the alternatives got closer and closer together — but he seemed always to be able to find a new "middle ground." His view often prevailed — making U.S. policy therefore appear to be an endless series of "half steps" toward all-out war.

McGEORGE BUNDY, probably LBJ's closest adviser on the war and considered the principal architect of Vietnam policy, was more concerned with protecting LBJ's image than the quality of advice he gave the President.

He toned down the "bomb now" panic reports of others, but when he went to Saigon to investigate personally for LBJ, McGeorge Bundy was seized by the "we must do something" fever that eventually afflicted everyone but

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McGeorge Bundy asked 'reprisals'

Annex A, "A Policy of Sustained Reprisal," memorandum to President Lyndon B. Johnson from McGeorge Bundy, Presidential assistant for national security, Feb. 7, 1965.

I. Introductory

We believe that the best available way of increasing our chance of success in Vietnam is the development and execution of a policy of sustained reprisal against North Vietnam — a policy in which air and naval action against the North is justified by and related to the whole Viet Cong campaign of violence and terror in the South.

While we believe that the risks of such a policy are acceptable, we emphasize that its costs are real. It implies significant US air losses even if no full air war is joined, and it seems likely that it would eventually require an extensive and costly effort against the whole air defense system of North Vietnam. US casualties would be higher — and more visible to American feelings — than those sustained in the struggle in South Vietnam.

Yet measured against the costs of defeat in Vietnam, this program seems cheap. And even if it fails to turn the tide — as it may — the value of the effort seems to us to exceed its cost.

II. Outline of the Policy

1. In partnership with the Government of Vietnam, we should develop and exercise the option to retaliate against any VC act of violence against our personnel or property.

2. In practice, we may wish at the outset to relate our reprisals to those acts of relatively high visibility such as the Pleiku incident. Later, we might retaliate against the assassination of a province chief, but not necessarily the murder of a hamlet official; we might retaliate against a grenade thrown into a crowded cafe in Saigon, but not necessarily to a shot fired into a small shop in the countryside.

3. Once a program of reprisals is clearly underway, it should not be necessary to connect each specific act against North Vietnam to a particular outrage in the South. It should be possible, for example, to publish weekly lists of outrages in the South and to have it clearly understood that these outrages are the cause of such action against the North as may be occurring in the current period. Such a more generalized pattern of reprisal would remove much of the difficulty involved in finding precisely matching targets in response to specific atrocities. Even in such a more general pattern, however, it would be important to insure that the general level of reprisal action remained in close correspondence with the level of outrages in the South. We must keep it clear at every stage both to Hanoi and to the world, that our reprisals will be reduced or stopped when outrages in the South are reduced or stopped — and that we are not attempting to destroy or conquer North Vietnam.

4. In the early stages of such a course, we should take the appropriate occasion to make it clear our intent to undertake repris-

als on any further acts, major or minor, that appear to us and the GVN as indicating Hanoi's support. We would announce that our two governments have been patient and forbearing in the hope that Hanoi would come to its senses without the necessity of our having to take further action; but the outrages continue and now we must react against those who are responsible; we will not provoke; we will not use our force indiscriminately; but we can no longer sit by in the face of repeated acts of terror and violence for which the DRV is responsible.

5. Having once made this announcement, we should execute our reprisal policy with as low a level of public noise as possible. It is to our interest that our acts should be seen — but we do not wish to boast about them in ways that make it hard for Hanoi to shift its ground. We should instead direct maximum attention to the continuing acts of violence which are the cause of our continuing reprisals.

6. This reprisal policy should begin at a low level. Its level of force and pressure should be increased only gradually — and as indicated above should be decreased if VC terror visibly decreases. The object would not be to "win" an air war against Hanoi, but rather to influence the course of the struggle in the south.

7. At the same time it should be recognized that in order to maintain the power of reprisal without

risk of excessive loss, an "air war" may in fact be necessary. We should therefore be ready to develop a separate justification for energetic flak suppression and if necessary for the destruction of Communist air power. The essence of such an explanation should be that these actions are intended solely to insure the effectiveness of a policy of reprisal, and in no sense represent any intent to wage offensive war against the North. These distinctions should not be difficult.

8. It remains quite possible, however, that this reprisal policy would get us quickly into the level of military activity contemplated in the so-called Phase II of our December planning. It may even get us beyond this level with both Hanoi and Peiping, if there is Communist counter-action. We and the GVN should also be prepared for a spurt of VC terrorism, especially in urban areas, that would dwarf anything yet experienced. These are the risks of any action. They should be carefully reviewed — but we believe them to be acceptable.

9. We are convinced that the political values of reprisal require a continuous operation. Episodic responses geared on a one-for-one basis to "spectacular" outrages would lack the persuasive force of sustained pressure. More important still, they would leave it open to the Communists to avoid reprisals entirely by giving up only a small element of their own program. The Gulf of Tonkin affair produced a sharp upturn in morale in South Vietnam. When it remained an isolated episode, it was followed by a severe relapse. It is the

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An awesome report

One of the most intriguing aspects of The New York Times report of the secret study made of American participation in the Vietnam war is the revelation of the undercover or covert activities engaged in by our government. Reading the report with its analysis, comment and documentation is like lifting the lid on a boiling, seething cauldron.

It is fascinating to follow the secret plotting and planning of both military and civilian officials to thwart the obvious machinations of North Vietnam in Laos and South Vietnam; the undercover military assistance given by this country while maintaining an outward appearance of non-involvement.

No less interesting is the documentation of the long period of preparation to escalate the war by open bombing of North Vietnam in 1964, the hesitancy of the President to give the green light to the plans, and the final decision to take advantage of the Gulf of Tonkin incident to launch the bombing early in 1965.

Then there is that hush-hush episode that preceded the open bombing when a Canadian emissary went to Hanoi at the request of the United States to warn of dire consequences if the North Vietnamese did not stop directing and supporting insurgency in South Vietnam and Laos. Obviously, North Vietnam officials were not impressed.

It comes as a shock to many that during this period of much secret activity and decision-making in high U.S. circles, the Central Intelligence Agency completely discounted the domino theory. It will be recalled that this was the theory that if we permitted Vietnam to fall into the hands of the Communists it would only be a matter of time before Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and, in fact, all Southeast Asia would fall into their hands.

The CIA said this would not happen, but the Johnson Administration military and civilian planners refused to accept the evaluation and proceeded on the assumption that the weak and tottering South Vietnam government would topple without serious interdiction by United States forces.

Thus was laid the groundwork for the bombing campaign followed by massive injection of U.S. ground forces into Vietnam. This behind-the-scenes look at the thinking and planning that went into our military and political strategy in Vietnam is enlightening. It shows how the course of history is determined, and the life and death of thousands is decided. Not only is it enlightening, it is awesome.